

A History of AAUW of Virginia 1925-2000

Celebrating 75 Years of Excellence

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Assembled and edited from the actual histories of AAUW of Virginia for 1925-1960 and 1960-1970. Jean Nichols provided material for the years 1970-1985, Kay Gravatt for the years 1985-1990, and Neola Waller, 1990-2000. The history was presented by Past Presidents Mary Thrasher, Doris DeHart, Jean Nichols, Roz Exum, Elaine Lailas, Kay Gravatt, Marion Stillson, Nancy Richardson and Peggy Stotz, and President Neola Waller at the AAUW of Virginia Diamond Jubilee Convention in April 2000.

On March 27-28, 1925, there assembled in Williamsburg, Virginia, a group of Virginia women, called together as delegates from the already existing local branches of the American Association of University Women, with the intent to form a Virginia State Division of the organization. It was a notable gathering of women--mainly educators--among them several who had already associated themselves with the national organization and who were, with some of the others present, destined to play leading roles in the national and regional organizations and the Virginia State Division. At the morning session on the 28th the motion was made and passed to form a state organization.

When the meeting adjourned that afternoon, the Virginia Division of AAUW was a reality. Already there appear in the minutes of that meeting some of the same interests which have occupied and still occupy the minds of the members of the local branches and of the state today. There are apparent an interest in working in the state for bringing about legislation for an increase in funds for the state supported schools and an interest in the pre-school age for which AAUW even then had a tentative program formed. There were in the state at that time seven local branches, including Richmond, founded in 1909, the Norfolk Branch which was founded in 1918, the Lynchburg Branch in 1920, the one at Sweet Briar in 1921, and Charlottesville, Roanoke, and Williamsburg in 1923. By the following year the number of branches had increased to 10, with the addition of branches in Newport News, Staunton, and Petersburg.

According to the minutes of the 1927 convention held in Lynchburg, there was considerable discussion which stressed the inadequacy of the current dues which barely covered the cost of stationery, postage, and the necessary mimeographed work. The state treasury had a balance of \$35.00. By this time there were 11 branches with the addition of Blacksburg. Staunton withdrew the following year. From this time on the Division grew rapidly. In 1929 Harrisonburg formed a branch, Winchester in 1931, Bedford in 1932, Staunton reorganized in 1933, and Fredericksburg in 1938.

The Virginia Division in the 30's decade worked not only for the betterment of the curricula in the schools but also tried to improve various situations for those who taught in them, with its eye as always turned favorably on women. It promoted the idea of teacher training and took a stand for not increasing, and reducing if possible, the number of education courses required by the State Department of Education for teacher certification; it held out for the equalization of salaries for men and women doing the same work, and for removing the discriminatory ruling against married women teaching in the public schools.

There can be no question but that one of the most important aids in drawing together the members of the State Division has been the State Bulletin. Though the use to which it is put in the branches has from time to time been questioned as sufficient justification for it, it, without a doubt, tends to make for state solidarity, by being a mouthpiece for the state presidents and by keeping the membership informed as to the activities of the different branches. The cost of publishing and distributing it has from the first been a problem. In 1931 it cost about 10 cents a copy and was sent to 30 members, state officers and some of the branch officers. By the following year, it was sent to every member in the state.

The Virginia State Division felt the effects of World War II in numerous ways, though in general its work went on very smoothly. In the first place, the state meeting in 1945 was abandoned on account of the request of the Federal Government that travel be curtailed as much as possible. Elections were carried on by mail, and the bulletins for the period, containing the state president's annual report and the usual news of the branches, gave a pretty clear idea of what was going on.

The 40's saw the addition of branches in Portsmouth in 1940, Danville in 1941, Arlington County in 1944, Alexandria in 1945, Culpeper in 1946, and Hampton in 1949.

The Virginia Division has been one of the most active on the Atlantic coast in the field of legislation, both in the federal and state fields. The Board from the beginning urged branches to study local and state issues and to keep abreast of current legislation in all fields. The branches have been very active in support of measures concerned with education and social welfare. The state organization was very active in promoting jury duty for women.

In 1954 the Arlington Branch proposed a resolution in favor of maintenance of good public schools, adopted by the South Atlantic Regional Conference and the Virginia Division Convention. After some schools were closed following federal court orders in conflict with massive resistance, AAUW branches in Virginia established tutoring groups as temporary substitutes for the closed schools.

The 50's decade saw the establishment of eight other branches: Falls Church in 1950, Waynesboro in 1951, Radford in 1952, Springfield in 1955, Norton and Mt. Vernon in 1956, the Princess Anne Branch at Virginia Beach in 1958, and Suffolk in 1959.

The Division began the 1960's aware of a deeply felt concern, sustained and strengthened during the latter half of the 50's by the firm and courageous stand for the preservation of a statewide system of free public schools. Major accomplishments included positive and fruitful action on behalf of public education for all pupils (e.g. for compulsory school attendance and against tuition grants for private schools). The Division consistently opposed tuition grants to pupils in private, nonsectarian schools, regarding them as so-called "escape valves". An ardent supporter of public education, the Division continued to speak out against these funds being siphoned off from already inadequate public school financing. These tuition grants were eliminated only in 1969 when they were declared unconstitutional by a three-judge Federal court.

Foundation giving doubled during this decade and often surpassed the national per capita average. In 1963 Charlottesville was first in the nation and in 1969 Virginia Beach was second with a per capita contribution of \$27.02.

New Virginia branches in this decade were Reston-Herdon and McLean Area, both in 1969.

The Division long supported measures to protect and improve the legal status of women, to improve welfare services and facilities, and to protect consumers. The Division joined with 34 other organizations in the state to press for the creation of a Virginia Commission on the Status of Women, which was affirmed by a General Assembly bill passed in 1970. Division dues reached \$2 per member, membership reached 3,100 and the Division annual budget was \$3,300.

From adoption in 1971 of the first Virginia Division resolution in support of ratification of the **Equal Rights Amendment** to the U.S. Constitution Virginia members worked with intensity and devotion to accomplish the impossible: a vote for ERA in the General Assembly of Virginia. The amendment read simply, Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or any state on account of sex.

Highlights of the efforts included organization of and leadership in the coalition of 44 state organizations for ratification of ERA and, in its final years, moving the state convention in protest outside Virginia to Washington, DC, in 1981 and to Maryland, a ratified state, in 1982. The decade and a half was also marked with participation in the **UN International Woman's Decade** and completion of the Association Centennial Fund that expanded our Fellowships Fund into the Educational Foundation with additional funding for education and services through research, grants and projects, many for branches and members.

Branches increased giving to Fellowships Fund/EFP from \$12,095 in 1971 to nearly \$30,000 in 1985. During the decade, membership peaked at 3,641 and the number of branches to 43. The 1970's brought new branches in Wytheville in 1971, Woodbridge in 1972, Fairfax City in 1973, Manassas in 1975, Bon Air in 1976, and Vienna in 1979. Unfortunately, all four branches founded in the 1980's have since disbanded.

As interest in the ERA waned, due to its failure to gain ratification, gender equity had become a concern for AAUW. Most of us have lived through the male-only era for Virginia Military Institute, where the issue was one of using public funds for public education which benefited men only. The Virginia Division signed on as an amicus curii to the brief that was filed with the Supreme Court by AAUW and other organizations to open VMI enrollment to women. The Supreme Court's ruling in favor of admitting women students was a giant step forward for equal opportunity for women.

During the 1980's, the state superintendent of schools joined other dignitaries in presenting a statewide workshop hosted by the Virginia Division in Richmond on Public Support for Public Education, a major theme for Virginia AAUW for its entire 75 years. Throughout our long history, providing strong public schools for Virginia's children and youth has been our number one priority.

We continue to oppose school vouchers which would use public education funds for private schools. Those statements just read from the 1960's are as appropriate today as they were forty years ago. Resolutions to provide school vouchers emerge each year in the General Assembly and require the diligent efforts of the state lobby corps to prevent their passage. The AAUW of Virginia lobby corps has earned recognition and respect throughout the General Assembly and members are known for their persistence in working for legislation that benefits women and public education.

Research done by the Educational Foundation in the 90's decade, How Schools Shortchange Girls, Hostile Hallways, Gender Gaps, prompted AAUW of Virginia members and branches to speak at school board meetings, to write news articles, to host math-science events and Sister-to-Sister Girls Summits, and to advocate at every opportunity to create a level playing field for girls.

Branches added in the last decade are Great Falls in 1990; Chesterfield in 1992; AAUW's first online branch, Northern Virginia Online Branch in 1995; and our newest branch, Smith Mountain, formed in the year 2000, giving us 38 branches across the Commonwealth.

The Diamond Donor Project provides the means to fund research to benefit women in their quest to continue learning throughout their lives, to extend our diamond anniversary commemoration well beyond the 75th year, to honor those leaders who have brought us to this momentous occasion, and to acknowledge our deep affection and pride in being members of the American Association of University Women of Virginia.